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ABSTRACT

Teachers can take advantage of current presidential elections by having students keep journals in which they analyze public discourse as they record their responses to the campaign rhetoric. An interesting phenomenon that emerges from this activity is a sense of the political identity of the students, a perspective that colors virtually all of their responses. The challenge is to design activities for this analysis that allow students to examine their biases and prejudicial thinking. Teachers must take into account students' attitudes toward politics in general, since some students shy away from politics or even fear the false reality in which politicians have their being. The simplicity with which some students approach the candidates and their propagandistic literature should concern all teachers who value civic literacy. The journals also reveal how interwoven students' political and religious lives are. Students' work or professional experience also colors their responses to political rhetoric. In a highly diverse classroom, then, composition instructors must establish an attitude of trust to foster a civic literacy among students. Journals show how students' attitudes toward political rhetoric change as a result of their study of the campaign. Writing instruction, then, must address the analysis of public discourse, a task that should be carried out at all levels of instruction. (HB)

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Presidential Political Rhetoric:
High School and College Students Respond

During the past presidential election season, a colleague of mine and I decided to have students keep journals--based on campaign rhetoric--throughout the election. My class was a section of Comp. I at a large, midwestern community college. This class included a diverse mix of traditional and non-traditional students, typical of an introductory, community college course. My colleague's class was a section of high school students enrolled in junior English in an affluent suburban high school.

Clearly, the most interesting theme to emerge from the students' work was the way that their political identities are a curious and complex mixture of family socialization, religion, occupation and second-hand oral lore that all collapses into a consensus among members of the various communities within which the students function, a phenomenon Kathleen Hall Jamieson refers to as "meltdown."

Because of this, different students provided wildly different analyses of the same political texts. (I am using "text" here in a very general sense.) For example, my high-school-teacher colleague showed his class one of the televised debates. The

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students watched a portion of the debate with sound and a portion without sound. The students' response writings reflected very different biases. For example, one student writes that

> Bush seemed nervous. He kept turning and moving his hands. His face also had an expression that kind of seemed to beg for your vote. . . . When the sound was off, he looked like he was in trouble. You could almost see the sweat running down his face.
>
> Clinton was well in control. He seemed like a leader and very confident about himself. . . . With the sound off he still seemed in control.

A second student, by contrast, observes that

> Bush looks around at everyone and speaks very calmly. his eyebrows and forehead wrinkles also. Bush speaks honestly and openly with sincerity. He talks as though he really is concerned with what happens to our country.
>
> Clinton's mouth goes down on the left side when he speaks and his forehead wrinkles. He also moves his head around a lot. He seems to smile when he talks. It's kind of annoying. Clinton talks like he's carefree and confident. Clinton's hands move a lot. He doesn't talk to the people but puts Bush down and brags about Arkansas. He seems like he's lying.

While I am impressed with the detail of the analysis of high school students here, it is important to recognize the limitations of simply providing students with schemes for rhetorical analysis. Students will inevitably apply those schemes through the screens of their prior knowledge and socialization. The challenge is to

design activities for the analysis of public discourse that allow for students to feel comfortable examining their own biases and use this kind of examination as a bridge toward more abstract schemes for the analysis of rhetoric.

A couple of characteristics of the backgrounds of political knowledge that students brought to class seemed obvious to me as I reviewed my students' journals. First, political knowledge tends to be oral in nature. Students get a great deal of their information about political matters from oral sources, and students almost always place more credence in trusted oral sources than in more analytic sources detached from the student's community. Second, the students' sense of political self begins, for better or worse, with family. Lynette, a non-traditional student, wrote in her journal about her early experiences with political matters:

> Politics. I hear the word and cringe. This is a subject my father tried forcing on me. He explained I would need to know at least a little something about politics one day.
>
> Whoever knew the old fool could be right about something.

Subsequent journal entries revealed that Lynette knew very little about politics and did not care to learn. The journal assignment proved to be uncomfortable for her; after three weeks, she stopped completing the required pages. While I am not sure if there is any way to reach a student like this, I am convinced that she provides a compelling example of the hopelessness of presenting lessons on the analysis of rhetoric without first taking account of and dealing with the students' personal sense of political identity. I have no doubt that Lynette would have happily

memorized terms like bandwagon, glittering generalities, and so on. I also have no doubt that those terms would have become a very superficial part of her knowledge base without contributing meaningfully to civic literacy.

Misty, a new college student in her mid twenties, provides in her journal a nice example of the orality of American politics and persuasion. On 12 October, after watching a televised debate, Misty offers her analysis of each candidate:

> After watching the debate, here is my view of each candidate. Mr. Perot is a joke. Bush has screwed the economy so much, there is no way we'll survive if he becomes elected again. Clinton is off the wall on some of his topics, but I like him. . . .

Misty's comments take the shape of brief, self-evident truths without a hint of empirical support. Misty then goes on to offer advice to the candidates, advice laden with the trappings of oral wisdom and lore:

> These three men need to come to Olathe. There is an apartment complex where people work their butts off, working 40-50 hours a week and they live in this piece of crap complex, barely making ends meet. The police are there every night breaking some sort of problems up. These three men need to come see that. . . . They need to see how hard these people work and how it just doesn't pay off.

Misty's thoughts here, it seems to me, could just as easily be conversation around the water coolers or vending machines at work. The candidates exist in world that is not real. Misty's world is immediate, oral, and real. At best Mindy's journal entry is

touching in its honesty of voice, at worst the reasoning is simplistic and naive.

On her journal entry of 19 October, Misty describes a conversation with her family. She writes:

> My family had a discussion last night about Clinton, Perot, and Bush. My sister-in-law is terrified that Clinton is going to become president and take her job away.

While, Mindy does not even seem to be aware that a statement that Clinton would take away a person's job requires some degree of evidence, this conversation again contrasts the realness of the family as opposed to the world of the candidates. Further, this passage suggests a high level of fear and uncertainty; politics, and, by extension, political rhetoric are forces beyond the control of the family. Choosing a candidate is a serious matter with consequences for the family. The family discusses who they should support, but the family's analysis is limited almost to the level of superstition.

In her entry of 26 October, Misty continues her search for a candidate. Here she seems to rule out President Bush on the basis of a trusted elder:

> I did hear that Bush's wife spoke sometime last week. My grandfather said she spoke and she's "as full of shit as her husband is."

Then Misty goes on to discuss how she is becoming impressed with Clinton as a candidate. Clearly, she is being persuaded by Clinton's presentational ethos:

> They say that everything Clinton says is rehearsed and how he sounds fake. But truthfully, it sounds like Clinton is

> prepared more than rehearsed. I don't want a president who does and says things on the spur of the moment without much thought put into it. . . . I do know that Clinton has a pro-choice vote. He flat said he believes that every woman should have the choice about abortion which I agree with.

I am particularly impressed with her observation that Clinton "flat said" he was pro-choice. This reflects, it would seem to me, the oral sense of being as good as one's word, that something is not true until spoken by someone with a personal sense of presence that cannot be challenged. She seems ready, at this point, to accept Clinton as someone as good as his word.

Misty's entry of 2 November reflects a dramatic shift in sentiment, again because of an oral incident:

> On Saturday a friend and I went to the Perot Rally down in Bartle Hall. It was more excitement than I expected. People were everywhere. I got a poster, a red flag (American flag), and quite a few handouts.
>
> One of the handouts explained everything about Perot. It <u>told</u> me about his stand on the national debt and about his life and everything he has done.
>
> Another sheet had a song telling of Perot's campaign. It was a really neat song. . . .
>
> I have come to like Perot. He is an honest man who has answered every question given him. . . . <u>I also noticed that Perot talks in American, everyday terms</u>. (italics mine)

This business about "American, everyday terms" and about how the handout "told" her about Perot is so obvious I could probably let it pass, but I think Misty poses an interesting challenge to the

instructor who takes civic literacy seriously. To be sure, any effort to help Misty examine political rhetoric critically must begin from within her oral heritage and sense of self. It will not due to simply criticize her analysis as faulty and simplistic. Misty must be allowed to begin with her oral identity and, through discussion, writing, and involvement in literate communities build more sophisticated analytic powers.

Another interesting theme to emerge from the students' journals was the extent to which students' political and religious lives were woven together. This is perhaps best illustrated by Renee, a non-traditional student. She writes:

> Today at church we were given handouts on what the candidates were for and against. My thirteen year-old son asked to look at it. After studying for a while, he told me who he would vote for.
>
> He said Bush because he respects our rights. He was talking about children's rights. The unborn's rights.
>
> I was so proud of him. I have always been a firm believer that abortion is wrong. From my teens I've opposed it. I've always thought of it as murder.

I am sure that Renee is not aware of the irony of her entry. She claims to have acquired her political/religious values as a teenager, and she illustrates her son's growing acquisition of the same set of values at the same age. Her entry also illustrates how, for many students, a response to political rhetoric does not occur in an abstract vacuum. That response is inexorably woven together for many students with family and religion.

Joe, another non-traditional student with over ten years of

experience working for financial institutions, shows how students' work or professional experience also colors their responses to the language of politics:

> Today is the time for government cutbacks and hard working American growth economy to return. We as a nation must be willing to do the very best that we can in the workplace. We must support our companies and be ready to help our corporate entities be competitive. If the American people would do everything they could to bring back the productivity and work ethic that America had in the early 1950's we would not have to rely on our politicians to put us to work. . . .
>
> The media in the 90's seems to be overstepping their bounds by a wider and wider margin. People in today's society are blindly lead by the media. The days of good honest unbiased reporting are gone. Years ago you could listen and watch people like Walter Croncite [sic.] and have no idea who they favored in an election.

To be sure, Joe needs help in providing evidence in support of his claims. His journal entries reflect the wisdom of oral, corporate lore. It is appropriate for an instructor to demand that Joe develop support for his arguments. A serious challenge is that, in the process of looking for that support, Joe will most likely not even see contradictory evidence.

Derek, a traditional college freshman, provides a challenge along similar lines. His entries reflect oral traditions of argumentation and values clearly formed through family and community values stressing honor and military service. He writes:

> How can someone trust the Governor of Arkansas' ability to be Commander in Chief of our military? If a situation of hostility were to occur abroad, a young boy may say, well if the President did not serve why should I? . . . He lied about cheating on his wife. People ask how that relates to running a country? Who cares what he does in his personal life. // Well, I call these people liberals and foolish people. It <u>does</u> matter because if he lies to his wife and betrayed her don't you think he <u>might</u> do the same to America. Also it is a question of morality. Do we want an America of immorality for our children.

By contrast to Derek, Randy, another traditional freshman twice jailed for drug possession, shows political biases clearly grounded in the youth and drug cultures:

> I've switched back to Clinton again. . . . This switchback was because of a show on MTV. They had a forum where kids my age could ask questions to the political bigwigs. . . . The questions these kids asked were about things--important things--that haven't been talked about too much: AIDS, censorship, the environment. . . . The other day my boss (who is a die hard Republican) said something like: "Yeah, they were the people that killed an industry just to save some spotted owls." Fuck you Jeff. Fuck the republican way of thinking. And fuck that industry. . . .

After the election, Randy describes his choices:

> I voted for Clinton. I actually voted for two republicans. Not Bob Dole though. I voted for the judge that threw me in jail to lose his position in the courts. I hear that Al

Gore's daughters are pretty hot.

What then does an instructor do with a class that includes a convicted drug offender, a would-be military hero, a corporate man, a student so traumatized by early familial experiences with politics that she "cringes at the word," a couple of pro-life evangelicals, and someone who thinks the Perot campaign song is "pretty neat"? First, I believe that composition courses have an obligation to hold up for students public discourse and subject that discourse to scrutiny and analysis. We might call this the "civic literacy" component of composition, but it must begin by challenging the comfortable assumptions and unexamined metaphors by which our students define themselves. Second, this must happen in an atmosphere of trust. I believe that composition instructors should not be in the business of helping students to see the truth in the instructor's personal philosophical bias, be it Marxist, feminist, gay, neoconservative, evangelical, or whatever else happens to be slithering through the offices of graduate teaching assistants. At the very least, this sort of behavior by an instructor seems to me to be a sure way to alienate students and cause them to retreat into the security of their communities. At worst, this sort of thing opens us up to the kinds of ethical challenges so forcefully documented by Swartzlander, Pace, and Stamler in their recent article in The Chronicle of Higher Education. In short, I would argue that we should use what we know about the social construction of language and the dynamics of the discourse community as well as what we have learned about the way readers respond to texts (including the texts of the electronic media) as a starting point for helping students to

understand public discourse.

With our classes last fall, those students who were most successful with our journal assignments managed eventually to do more than a sophisticated job of analyzing political rhetoric. Rather, those students managed to also see that rhetoric in the context of their own decision-making process. For example, Ann, a non-traditional student, manages to see how her political values were shaped by family. She writes:

> I have always gained what little knowledge I have about politics from other people. I can remember far back in my early childhood my father constantly talking about politics and how his party was the only party there was--the GOP. . . . My father's constant radical tirades about the democrats must have rubbed off on me, as I now share some of his views.

The point here is not to change Ann's political views. The point is to help Ann come to a better understanding of the various screens through which she interprets public discourse.

Along these lines, Emily manages, in her journal, to do a close examination of her own response to a campaign commercial:

> [Describing a Bush campaign commercial] They are still talking about his character and not commenting on whether his programs' numbers add up. The camera zooms in close and shoots back out giving the effect of a beat beat with a person holding their breath. I caught myself doing that.

Similarly, Debbie both critiques a commercial and then analyzes her own response:

> [Describing a Perot commercial] As I watched his children speak, I felt as if I were watching the Brady Bunch. (The ad

> agency did a great job with the perfect American family image.) All four daughters were dressed impeccably, blond, blue-eyed, and charming. Of course, Perot's son was shown as a chunk-off-the-'ole-block. Mrs. Perot was the world's best mom. Ug! Yes, it was a blatant effort on Perot's part to endear himself to the voters. As much as I hate to admit it, it worked for me. I think it worked only because I really <u>wanted</u> to like Perot.

Debbie went on to explain her dissatisfaction with the other two candidates and her desire to support someone from outside official Washington.

Ultimately, however, we should move beyond this necessary first stage, where students are able to figure out why they respond as they do to political discourse. In her journal entry devoted to the analysis of a campaign commercial, Samantha manages a detached and reasonable detailed critique:

> [Describing a Bush commercial] The background music sounds like wind blowing. The screen doesn't give a full view of Bill Clinton's face. It begins with an eye and by the time the entire face should be showing, the commercial is over. His face takes on the look of a photograph negative. The music ends with a clank, almost sounding like a cell door closing.

Samantha went on to discuss the persuasive intent behind these communicative choices made by the producers of the advertisement. Samantha was, and remained, a Bush supporter, but she was able to unravel some of the deceptive rhetoric of her own candidate.

To conclude, then, I agree with Donald Lazere that a writing

class can contribute to students' emerging civic literacy in a way that political science or other relevant disciplines cannot. My experience, however, as a teacher at the middle school, high school, and college levels suggests that--whether the class is called Language Arts, English, or Composition--the analysis of public discourse is one of the available aspects of the "discipline" least emphasized by instructors.

Middle schools occasionally have brief units, typically called "mass media" or "communication skills," where students learn about card stacking and the like. Often the students create their own commercials or advertisements, which is great fun, but I rarely see anyone attempting to take the last crucial step and help students see the presence of deceptive language in their own lives and communities. At the middle-school level, the orientation is on doing--creating entertaining activities for students--but those activities are rarely brought back around to the issues alive and dynamic in the communities of the students. It is relatively harmless fun.

At the high school level, grammar or writing texts have the obligatory chapter, somewhere in the back, about logical fallacies, but as a former high school teacher and a current supervisor of student teachers, I have yet to see anyone teaching much of that. And even if it were taught, I suspect that it would be done in isolation and be even less effective that worksheet-based grammar drill. At the high school the orientation is usually on knowing, but that which we ask the students to know is almost never placed in a meaningful context.

At the college level, students are given an opportunity to

join the academic community, but far too little attention is given to the communities from which the students are coming and the tensions caused as students attempt to navigate the transition into academia. Further, I do not detect any serious groundswell of sentiment for the college composition course to pick up the challenges of civic literacy. I believe that instructors at all levels should pick up that challenge.

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